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# Perspectives among Successful Adult Learners in Two Diploma Completion Programs

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# Walden University

College of Education

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Cheryl Rice

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University

2018

Abstract

Perspectives Among Successful Adult Learners in Two Diploma Completion Programs

by

Cheryl A. Rice

MBA, Oklahoma City University, 1999

BA, University of Kentucky, 1981

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Education – Specialization in Community College Leadership

Walden University

November 2018

## Abstract

More than 24,000 U.S. high school students drop out each year, contributing to the approximate 1.1 million U.S. adults who have not earned the high school diploma or General Education Development. This failure in educational attainment contributes significantly to the lack of economic and workforce development opportunities as well as the standard of living for more than 10% of the statewide population of a midwestern state. In response to this problem, the state entered into model programming in 2015 with 2 new approaches for adult education to diploma programs. The purpose of this basic qualitative interpretive research study was to better understand the experiences of 9 adult learners who successfully completed 1 of 2 high school diploma completion programs. The conceptual framework for this study integrated the learning theory perspectives of Bruner and Bandura and the aspects of lifelong learning and its influence on the motivations and values of the adult learner. The codes and themes that emerged from the analysis of the interview process were the participants' connection to the program, extrinsic and intrinsic motivations, challenges that were experienced through the program, strategies for success that fostered the completion process, suggestions for program improvements, and the advice the participants would give to prospective students who are considering an adult diploma option. These results may contribute to a better understanding of success factors for adult students enrolled in diploma completion programs and support positive change and program effectiveness in the future.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband. You have supported me, given me strength, and helped me take each step down this road less traveled. You lifted me up with your words of encouragement, you kept my spirit alive when I was in doubt, and you helped me with your sweet reminders of the why when I started to forget. I thank you for your love and support, as we did this together.

I also want to thank all of my family and friends who have continued to cheer me on during this experience and believed in me in the most loving and caring way. You too gave me strength as to keep my focus on the end in mind. My sincere thanks to all of you for always being by my side through this incredible journey.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The United States is in the middle of an educational crisis. According to the World Education Organization (2017), more than 30 million adults in the United States who do not have a high school diploma and 20% of adults with a high school diploma have only beginning literacy skills. The United States is ranked 21st in numeracy and 16th in literacy of 24 countries in a recent assessment of adults' skills (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014). Despite recognizing the breadth and depth of this issue, the adult education system can serve only 2 million adults per year, which equates to only a fraction of the total demand, leaving lengthy waiting lists for enrollment in all 50 states (World Education Organization, 2017). The need for a robust adult education system with pathways to postsecondary opportunities is an economic imperative for the well-being of individuals and the nation (Stix & von Nostitz, 2012; World Education Organization, 2017).

When the United States falls behind other countries in adult literacy, it cannot compete economically without improving the skills of its workforce (DeSchryver & Dlugoleski, 2015). This failure in educational attainment contributes significantly to the lack of economic and workforce development opportunities and the standard of living (DeSchryver & Dlugoleski). Furthermore, adults without a high school diploma are more than twice as likely to be unemployed and almost three times as likely to live in poverty (World Education Organization, 2017) than those adults with a high school diploma and postsecondary attainment. In response to this problem, one midwestern state that has

introduced two alternative approaches for adults to attain high school credentials, the Adult Diploma Program (ADP) and the 22+ Program. The mission for both programs is to connect the undereducated adults to academic and technical training pathways that encourages opportunities for individual success that will lead to significant contributions to the state's economy (McMurrey, 2014).

My purpose in this study was to explore the experiences of successful adult learners' in the attainment of a secondary education credential to support future program development and participation. This can lead to the training and postsecondary opportunities that will have a positive influence to the overall education and economic health of today's society. In this chapter, I provide the background to the key issue, the problem statement, and my purpose in this study as to inform and support the research questions. I also provide the conceptual framework and the nature of the study. Last, I provide the key definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance, and I close with a summary of the study.

### **Background**

The U.S. adult learner population has become a cohort in transition that has been defined in multiple and often diverse ways (Minuzzo, 2006). A century ago, this group was simply labeled as nontraditional. In today's literature, the adult learner is more specifically defined by the attributes and characteristics that are integrated into the higher education system to ensure a better understanding of the learning and support needs for success (Ross-Gordon, 2011). This adult learner view became more comprehensive in identifying the importance of the ability to distinguish this group from the defined

characteristics of the traditional student. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2015), researchers generally consider the adult learner as nontraditional students with the following characteristics: being independent for financial aid purposes, having one or more dependents, being a single caregiver, not having a traditional high school diploma, delaying postsecondary enrollment, attending school part time, and being employed full time. The analysis and review of the nontraditional characteristics was critical and lead to the identification of the challenges that can affect their well-being, stress levels, and ability for success in both education and employment pathways (NCES, 2015).

Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl (2013) noted that by 2018, nearly 47 million jobs would require some form of postsecondary credential to provide the skill sets needed in this ever-changing and challenging environment. The number of job openings continues to grow, increasing the importance of the postsecondary education attainment level. These statistics are significant and are compounded by the number of adults without a high school diploma in the United States and the level of skills and the continued education required to fill the growing employment needs (DeSchryver & Dlugoleski, 2015). In another study, the Center on Education and Workforce at Georgetown University (2014) indicated that by the year 2020, 55 million job openings will require some postsecondary education and training. The predicted growth in job openings and the critical need to have a trained and work ready adult population have set the course for education reform (DeSchryver & Dlugoleski).



According to Bergman (2016), several states were working to address these issues using a variety of alternative secondary education models and to find ways that could create and sustain an educated workforce. Examples of these alternative secondary education models include the integration of competency-based education with work-based certifications and credit recovery options. Johnstone and Soares (2014) pointed to the value of developing competency-based programs that focused on the learning process and the mastery of skills at the same time. Furthermore, Carnevale, Rose, and Hanson (2012) indicated the need for innovative approaches to diploma equivalency programs and reducing the number of adults without a high school credential. This will have a positive influence in moving these adults toward a postsecondary education pathway and possibly improving the economic status of the country (Carnevale et al., 2012). Programs addressing these changing needs of adults who have not completed a high school education include the National Adult External Diploma Program (CASAS.org, 2015), High School 21+ Program in Washington State (SBCTC.edu, 2013), and the Adult Diploma Options in a midwestern state (DeSchryver & Dlugoleski, 2015).

The National External Diploma Program combined academic skills of math, reading, and science with life skills relating to self, social, and occupational awareness in a flexible performance-based program (CASAS.org, 2015). Participants are 18 years or older, not enrolled in traditional high school programs, and possess school level skills to meet academic and career goals. The Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS) integrated the transformative learning theory of Mezirow (1991) of how adults learn through the meaning of the experiences into its diploma completion process. Its

evaluation process included the analysis of competencies in 10 content areas including financial literacy, health, civic, geography, and skills for the 21st-century workplace. Several states have adopted this model including Maryland, New York, and Virginia (CASAS.org, 2015).

The Washington State Community and Technical Colleges system adopted the High School 21+ Program, which combines the competency-based learning models with academic and life skills in awarding the high school diploma. This program is based on the Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-Best) platform, developed to incorporate a contextualized instruction model integrating well-defined pathways to college and career readiness programming (SBCTC.edu, 2013).

In a midwestern state, alternative adult diploma options programs, which include both the ADP and the 22+ Adult High School Diploma pathways, have also been implemented (DeSchryver & Dlugoleski, 2015). The ADP was designed to increase the number of skilled individuals for the statewide in-demand occupations and provide an alternative pathway using competency-based education foundation for those adult without the high school diploma or its equivalency. The ADP provides adult learners a path to earn a high school diploma and an industry credential simultaneously through a competency-based learning environment (DeSchryver & Dlugoleski, 2015). This program sought to determine the skills necessary to fill local and regional workforce needs, develop an individualized plan for student success and measure progress on mastery of skills rather than relying on seat time in the classroom.

The 22+ Adult High School Diploma program integrated a blended pathway with both online and in-person learning models to serve non-traditional students seeking a high school equivalency or other adult education credential (DeSchryver & Dlugoleski, 2015). This program is offered through public school districts, community colleges, and other qualifying educational institutions across the state. This program was founded on the credit recovery-based model on the statewide graduation requirements. Adult learners are allotted 2 years for completion of this free resource provided by the state (DeSchryver & Dlugoleski, 2015).

Both of these state programs are mission centric to guide undereducated adults to pathways that will encourage opportunities for individual success (McMurrey, 2014). In this study, I worked to assist in gaining the perspectives from the students who have successfully completed each of the alternative diploma programs and to understand the reasons for program choice and their experiences that led to their successful achievement. I also sought to explore the perspectives and context of successful adult learners' experiences to support future program development and participation and to create a stronger understanding of the fundamental student values and position for an environment of success for the undereducated adult learner.

### **Problem Statement**

The failure in educational attainment contributes significantly to the lack of economic and workforce development opportunities and the standard of living of the population (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011). Recognizing the critical need for high school credentials, Georgetown University's Center on Education and Workforce (2014)

estimated that by 2020, nearly two-thirds of all jobs will require some postsecondary education and training beyond the high school diploma. According to Zenith (2013), competency-based education programs and policies have been modeled in several states across the United States. In particular, the states of Washington, Kentucky, and Colorado have explored new delivery models with connection to the adult learner population.

Although there have been various levels of success with the continued path to postsecondary education after the diploma status has been achieved, each has also demonstrated components of challenges in the development process. Recognizing the critical nature of the problem, there is a midwestern state that has worked to address this undereducated crisis. According to Hawley (2013), this particular state reached a population of more than 1.1 million adults without an earned high school diploma or General Education Development (GED) equivalency. To respond to this issue, in 2015, the statewide educational leadership and policy makers set out to develop two new approaches for adult education to diploma programs (DeSchryver & Dlugoleski, 2015).

In this study, I attempted to address the gap in the literature from the perspectives of students who have successfully completed their secondary education credential. In addition, the perspectives and context of successful adult learners' understandings may help support future program development and participation. This lead to the opportunity for a stronger understanding of the fundamental student values, and to build an environment of success for the adult learner needing secondary education.

### **Purpose Statement**

My purpose in this study was to understand the experiences of adult learners who successfully completed their secondary education through either the ADP or the 22+ Program in a midwestern state to consider future program development to address the undereducated adult population. This research also helped to develop a better understanding of why successful adult learners selected their respective program of choice.

### **Research Question**

How did successful students in either competency-based or credit recovery ADPs describe their experiences about successful completion in the program?

### **Conceptual Framework**

I used the conceptual framework for this study to integrate the learning theory perspectives of Bruner (1960) and Bandura (1977) and the aspects of lifelong learning and its influence on the motivations and values of the adult learner. The importance of understanding the adult learner in terms of the intrinsic motivations is critical in supporting their success. These motivational elements included the values and goals that are foundational in progressing on the educational pathway. My focus was to better understand the goals and outcomes of participants in two ADPs in a midwestern state from the perspective of adult learners who chose them and successfully completed them. Those perspectives can then be integrated into the future program development to help address the critical issue involving the undereducated adult population.

### **Nature of the Study**

The nature of the study was a basic qualitative interpretive research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) process to allow for the exploration and focus on the student experience in a diploma completion program. The study also informed continued strategy development for competency-based education and credit recovery programs used in this midwestern state to address the educational skills required for the demand of college and career ready adults.

### **Definitions**

*Adult education:* The adult education system refers to programs across the United States that offer instruction ranging from basic literacy and numeracy and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) to high school diploma equivalency, and for college and career readiness. Broadly defined, adult education includes educational activities that fall outside the traditional secondary education curriculum for an adult population including general educational development (GED) programs and credit recovery programs (Porowski, O’Conner, & Luo, 2014; World Education Organization, 2017).

*Adult learner:* For the purposes of this study, *adult learners* were defined as 25 years of age and older seeking secondary education and who have additional responsibilities such as family, career, or community (University College, 2012).

*Competency-based education:* Competency-based education is an approach to teaching and learning used in the learning process to validate concrete skills with

assessment measures, through flexible, variable pace, and personalized education programming (Johnstone & Soares, 2014).

*General Education Development (GED)*: The American Council on Education (ACE), which owns the GED trademark, coined the term to identify tests of general equivalency development that measure proficiency in science, mathematics, social studies, reading, and writing for the attainment of a high school diploma credential (Zhang, Guison-Dowdy, Patterson, & Song, 2011).

### **Assumptions**

My assumptions for this study were that the program providers would send out the invitation to participate to those students who have successfully completed the high school diploma program. I also assumed that participation would be voluntary, and that confidentiality would be provided and assured. Last, I assumed that the participants would respond to the interview questions with honesty and with full representation of their actual experience in the program.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of the study was limited to participants in one midwestern state and who have completed one of the two programs. The research was delimited to a sample of nine students who participated in either one of the high school diploma completion programs. My concentration in the study was on the experiences of the participants in the program of choice and how these events relate to the adult learning theories.

### **Limitations**

Potential design or methodological limitations were inherent to qualitative research. This was due to the traditional beliefs that only validity and reliability can be achieved through quantitative means. According to Creswell (2007), qualitative research takes on the role of ensuring the credibility and the trustworthiness of the information that is formulated through the research process. Another limitation was that the data were gathered through participant interviews over the phone and I would not have the opportunity to observe the participant during the interview process. Some participants may have had difficulty in remembering all aspects of their experience after the successful completion of the diploma program.

### **Significance**

I expect that my study will have significant effect for the potential students enrolled in the two diploma programs and in the understanding of the student experience with the successful completion and the relationship to the adult learning theories. This provided important data to assist in the development and integration of key support mechanisms for program effectiveness with the participating community colleges and other educational providers of these two diploma programs. Finally, my study may be used to inform educational policy makers in the sustainability and continued development of the statewide educational approaches to reducing the number adults without high school diplomas.



### **Summary**

In this study, I explored the gap in the research on the perspectives and context of successful adult learners' experiences to support future program development and participation and create a stronger understanding of the fundamental student values, and position for an environment of success, for the undereducated adult learner. In addition, I gathered data through these reflective experiences of students who participated in and successfully completed each program to explore these experiences in relationship to adult learning theories of Bruner (1960) and Bandura (1977). This study will also inform continued strategy development for competency-based education and credit recovery platforms used in the midwestern state of interest and to address the educational skills required for the demand of college and career ready adults.

In this chapter, I provided the background of the study, the problem, and the purpose of the research. Next, I presented the research questions, conceptual framework, and the nature of the study. I then explained the definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and the significance to provide context to the study. Finally, in this summary, I discussed the gap in the research and the process for the study. Chapter 2 contains the conceptual framework and the literature review with empirical research studies addressing adult learners and factors of risk and success, and the diploma program options that helped build a foundation for this study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

According to the World Education Organization (2014), more than 30 million adults do not have a high school diploma. This crisis has an enormous estimated economic cost of \$15.4 trillion from lower earnings, lower taxes paid, welfare costs, and additional criminal justice needs and health care costs. This educational issue has contributed significantly to the economic downturn, the standard of living for the population, and the availability of work ready adults to meet the industry demands across the United States (World Education Organization, 2014). The Georgetown University's Center on Education and Workforce has estimated that by 2020, nearly two-thirds of all jobs will require some postsecondary education and training beyond the high school diploma, forcing states to explore, expand, and create program opportunities to help address this issue (Carnevale et al., 2011). These program opportunities have led to competency-based education initiatives and other statewide policies in support of alternative solutions for high school completion equivalencies and in the promotion of postsecondary enrollments.

Recognizing that this is a national issue, Hawley (2013) stated that a midwestern state had experienced an increasing number of high school dropouts annually and had reached 1 million working aged adults without a high school credential. This equated to the potential economic effects of approximately \$470 billion from the overall tax base and the costs involving the welfare and health care systems statewide (DeSchryver & Dlugoleski, 2015). In addition, there would be an additional estimated economic effect of 459,000 unfilled jobs requiring a skilled workforce to meet current and future

employment demands (DeSchryver & Dlugoleski). In response to this problem, the educational leadership of the midwestern state moved to develop two new approaches for adult education options to diploma programs, the ADP and the 22+ ADP (DeSchryver & Dlugoleski).

According to McMurrey (2014), diploma program options work to connect the undereducated adults to academic and technical training pathways that encourage opportunities for individual success that can lead to significant contributions to the states' economy. In this study, I expected to assist in gaining the perspectives from the students who have completed these programs, their reasons for program choice, and their experiences that they see as leading to their successful achievement. In this study, I sought to explore the gap in research on the perspectives and context of successful adult learner experiences to support future program development and participation. This may create a stronger understanding of student values, and an opportunity to support an environment of success environment for the undereducated adult learner.

Using my study may help to inform the educational leadership in the sustainability and continued development of statewide approaches to reducing the number adults without high school diploma status. In this chapter, I present the literature search strategy, the conceptual framework, and the literature review related to the concepts on the adult learner and the factors that need to be understood to create a positive and successful learning environment.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The literature search strategy involved the review of peer-reviewed research primarily found using the Walden University Library database system, Google Scholar, and the ERIC database. The search strategy involved using key words or phrases that would relate to recent articles that included elements of relevance to the topic.

The key words and phrases that I used the most in the search included the following: *adult learner, adult students, nontraditional students, adult education, adult learner characteristics, adult learners with high school diploma rates, at risk students, dropout rates, dropouts, dropout prevention, adult learner barriers, economic impact, academic achievement, adult learner success, adult learner motivation, possible selves, GED, adult diploma programs, alternative diploma programs, adult education programs, graduation rates, GED success rates, adult learner engagement strategies, andragogy, and social change.*

### **Conceptual Framework**

According to the National Academy of Academic Advising (NACADA), the importance of understanding adult learners in terms of the intrinsic motivations is critical in supporting their success (NACADA, 2017). These motivational elements included the values and goals that are foundational for progressing on the educational pathway for the adult learner. Bruner's (1960) theoretical mindset integrated the development of three areas of interest that are used to understand the learning development process. These included the role of structure in learning; the readiness for learning that create a foundation for the learning process; and the discussion of the motives, values, and goals

for the learning process. Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory suggested that people learn from one another via observation, imitation, and modeling with focus on the attention, memory, and motivation. Both Bruner's (1960) view of learning as an active process and Bandura's (1977) learning in the context of social engagement served as the basis for the conceptual framework of this study.

### **Bruner: Learning Development Process**

Bruner (1960) discussed the need to review the public education arena and the consideration of breadth and depth of the teaching and learning process. This concern became the focus of many facets of education that include the curriculum, the diversity of the communities, and the themes of human and learning development process. The role of structure in learning was explored as a concept that is necessary in providing meaningful pathways to learning and its application to real world experiences. Moreover, the learning process is one of actual transfer of knowledge and leads to a mastery of concepts. Bruner explained that the structure in learning should lead the individual to new learning experiences with ease and confidence. This learning structure integrates the experiences as a teaching opportunity for the individual and helps to define future behavior that one can draw upon when in similar situations.

A second area of focus was introduced as the readiness for learning that includes the concept for developmental stages and the acquisition of information (Bruner, 1960). With the focus on the human intellectual developmental stages, Bruner noted that these helped to shape an individual's view of the world and how to interact with the environment from their experiences. This perspective involves how learning incorporates

elements of acquisition of information, the transformation of information, and how this process is integrated into daily activities. Bruner also included the key component of the evaluation of information process and the accuracy of one's own interpretation and its essential use in the environment.

Finally, Bruner (1960) discussed the nature of motives for learning across generations, initially seen as applicable to youthful learners. Bruner contended that these motives or ideals could also be applied to the adult learner making the desire to learn connections with learners of all ages. This is especially true for the educational goal as a framework of reaching the overall point of completion. The researcher stated, "While one benefits from clarity about the ends of education, it is often true that we may discover or re-discover new ultimate objectives" (Bruner, 1960, p. 69). These motives include the elements of arousal of interest, competitiveness, cultural influences, and desire to understand. The competitiveness aspect of learning comes from the cultural influences that shape the nature of learning in particular as evidenced in the United States. Ultimately, it is the adult learner's desire to understand and learn the educational material that can provide context to their learning experience.

### **Bandura: Social Cognitive Theory**

Bandura's (1977) work complemented Bruner's (1960) concepts for analyzing human thought and its connectedness to the social learning theory. Bandura noted that social learning theory plays a key role in how individuals use a process of self-regulatory assessment to influence their learning process. This learning process, is based on external and internal thought, then integrated into future behavior when the individual is

confronted with similar situations. The thought process of a unified framework was expanded upon for analyzing human thought and behavior (Bandura, 1977). Bandura also discussed the important elements of the social cognitive theory that address the vicarious, symbolic, and self-regulatory processes in relation to the adult learner. In addition, Bandura recognized the aspects of human thought, affect, and behavior and their influence on perceptions. Bandura conveyed the importance of the experience by explaining that the learning process is enhanced through observational methods and the ability to model human behavior. These observations can then be codified and retrieved for later use, integrating this theoretical aspect through the role of imitation. Bandura and Walthers (1963) noted that this role of imitation can also be integrated in the both deviant and conforming behaviors in the learning process.

Bandura (1977) focused on the motivational forces behind the needs, drives, and impulses. This suggests that these are principal components of behavior. Bandura also added that although these forces maybe integrated and operating below the level of consciousness, they are integral to behavior. While introducing the perspective of the reading drive, Bandura discussed the forces influencing motivation. The reading drive incorporates two distinct elements when assessing values, goals, and motives. The first element of this key drive was described as to how research makes it possible for individuals to review choices in their reading behavior. These variables include what people choose to read, when they choose to read, how long they spend reading the material, and lastly, the order or sequence of what is read from the different materials. As

these perspectives of Bandura's may provide key information on the primary motives, it is the second element that provides the deeper meaning to the goal.

Bandura's (1977) second element includes not the driving forces but the benefits derived from the reading behavior; therefore, the enjoyment and the cognitive gains from the reading event. Thus, the discussion continued with the point that there are underlying motives that drive behavior in which brings a sense of self-discovery that adds to the value to a set of activities. The values, goals, and motives elements lead to the discussion of functions and outcomes realized by the learning behaviors.

Bandura (1977) provided key discussion elements of the values, goals, and motives to the learning process and the integration of functions, and outcomes of the adult learner. Furthermore, Bandura discussed the "learning by response consequences" (p. 17) as the results that are inherent to the learning process. These results can generate both positive and negative effects that produce the response consequence activity. This was noted as a process of differentiated reinforcement, which leads to the determination of the level of success. This process concludes with eventual integration or separation based on the effectiveness analysis.

Further discussion by Bandura (1977) revealed the functions can be realized through this response consequence process. Bandura identified three main functions to support this learning activity: informative, motivational, and reinforcement processes that are integrated into the learning process. The informative evaluation moves the learning process as to how the content of the situation is integrated and the effects that are produced as a result. This learning process is then evaluated as either to be positive or



negative and stored for later retrieval. Thus, this evaluation serves as a guide for future action. Estes (1972) added that even if responses have been reinforced in a positive manner, this does not necessarily warrant that repeated behavior will result in similar rewards.

As in the motivational function, Bandura (1977) added that humans will anticipate the perceived outcomes of a specific behavior that can produce either positive reaction or a negative consequence as a result of the particular action. Past experiences can also lay the foundation for these expectations of events that follow actions of behavior. These behaviors can bring about consequences that possess valued benefits that can be understood through the positive reactions or responses from others. The converse can also be present with these past experiences, whereas certain behaviors can bring about effects that are not positive, which will sway the individual from performing or repeating such action. As for the adult learner, the past educational experiences can play an enormous role in the current environment for either enhancing the confidence factor or eliciting fear and uncertainty. These elements of emotion can provide the process of cognitive problem solving that can give meaning, form, and provide context to their experiences.

### **Rationale for Conceptual Framework**

Bruner (1960) and Bandura (1977) stressed the importance of the reinforcing function and the aspect of support for the adult learner. This function acts as an explanation of behavior as the consequence benefit is strengthened automatically without conscious involvement. It was found that reinforcing behaviors were strongly recognized

when rewards became present and integrated in the behavioral process (Bandura, 1977). The motivations and the values of the learning process are the critical aspects of integrating key information and the impact in social change. These elements describe the foundation of the aspects of learning and its impact on the value, goals and motives and the functions of learning of the adult learner.

This conceptual framework was the basis for this research that considers the adult learner's successful experiences in the quest for advancement in their educational pursuits of secondary and post-secondary education. The Bruner (1960) and Bandura (1977) perspectives provided context and awareness of the intricacies of the breadth and depth of the needs and services for the adult learner in their pursuit of lifelong learning opportunities. This was especially linked to those adult learners who have experienced key challenges in the learning process along their educational path. These concepts led to the development of the research questions in exploring the perspectives from the adult learners' experiences about the learning goals and successful completion.

### **Literature Review**

Minuzzo (2006) described adult learners as a unique group of individuals with the experience and the need for a circle of support in achieving educational goals. In this literature review I discuss the need for better understanding of these characteristics and key program efforts to support those mechanisms for success. These efforts include the identified risk factors for the adult learner, the success indicators, and program options designed to help in the achievement of the desired educational level.

### **Adult Learner Risk Factors**

The adult learner population has become a cohort in transition that has been defined in multiple and often diverse ways (Minuzzo, 2006). A century ago, this group was views as a nontraditional population, but in current literature, the adult learner is now defined by the attributes and characteristics integrated into the higher education system that helps to ensure a better awareness of the educational, workforce, and support needs for success (Ross-Gordon, 2011).

The understanding of the adult learner has become more comprehensive which emphasizes the importance to distinguish this group from the defined characteristics of the traditional student. According to the NCES (2015) research identifies key characteristics of nontraditional students that include being independent for financial aid purposes, having one or more dependents, being a single caregiver, not having a traditional high school diploma, and being employed full time. The analysis and review of the nontraditional characteristics is critical as evidenced by the high percentage of adult learners possessing these key characteristics and how they can affect the adult learner's well-being, levels of stress, and success in education pursuits and employment opportunities (NCES, 2015).

The studies of Flynn, Brown, Johnson, and Rodger (2011), Hynes (2014), Lemon and Watson (2011), and Rabourn, Shoup, and BrckaLorenz (2015) explored the risk factors of the adult learner and the reasons for leaving high school. Furthermore, these studies reviewed the challenges when contemplating the return to high school to complete

the diploma process. These challenges encompass academic preparedness, self-esteem and confidence, and personal economic elements.

Lemon and Watson (2011) helped to illustrate these challenges with the early identification variables in predicting potential high school dropouts. The variables of interest included the relationship involving the student's level of wellness, at-risk status, perceived stress, and mattering. The research involved 175 students attending a high school in the southeastern United States. The quantitative study used multiple assessment instruments as well as a demographics survey to measure and better understand the at-risk status of dropping out of high school. The findings of the study did indicate a significant relationship to the concept of self, self-esteem, and confidence measures of the students to the at-risk factors. It was indicated that these factors could be used as a predictor of drop out behavior. The additional variables of mattering, perceived stress, and coping mechanisms together did not indicate a significant relationship to whether a student was at-risk for dropping out of school. However, Lemon and Watson noted that the research did lead to important implications for school counselors and educators. Recommendations from the study include the implementation of intervention programs and enhanced counseling opportunities as to strengthen student support processes and encourage completion.

Flynn et al.'s (2011) research involved a qualitative study that explored the categories of potential barriers to education for the adult learner population. The study aimed to address the questions including identifying the potential adult learners, determine the learning requirements, and the risks and benefits of education engagement

for this population. This study involved nine adult learner participants who were identified as those who have been underserved by the mainstream adult education services due to factors of culture, gender, and socioeconomics. The participants were all currently attending programs at a placement center, had some previous school experience, and all had encountered family and/or environmental challenges that separated them from the mainstream systems of support. Through an interview approach, the questions focused on the important events and personal influences that lead the individual to their current state and reasons for exiting the educational environment. The research results were shaped by the opportunity to learn of these experiences through the participants' own voice and perspectives on adult education services and the barriers that exist. Flynn et al. noted that there are many responsibilities that encircle the adult learner which can present a hardship to reach the goals of higher education. The adult learner would often describe his or her primary role in terms of the occupation or family obligations as primary and the secondary role as a student (Flynn et al., 2011). These multiple roles and responsibilities make evident the complexities that surround the adult learner in his or her quest and the barriers or challenges that are present toward completion of a credential.

Flynn et al. (2011) found five overlapping areas as the barriers to education which were categorized as following: family values and responsibilities, the emotional effect of family poverty on participants' lives, disrupted school and learning experiences, social exclusion and personal challenges, and turning points in the participants' education and hopes for the future. These non-financial areas of concern were reviewed as to how

they prevented or strongly stood as dominant barriers for marginalized adults in their participation or engagement in the educational process. Furthermore, the likelihood of success was mostly predetermined by the past educational experience and could serve as the largest constraint. These experiences were categorized as situational, institutional, and dispositional for the adult learner.

According to Flynn et al. (2011), the situational barriers stem from the adult learner's perception of cost, childcare, time management, and home and job responsibilities. Hence, with this population the situational barriers relate to an individual's situation in life, economic status, and family support. They noted that those experiencing low incomes have less access to media or other types of literacy activities and practices. Furthermore, adults living in poverty or with barriers to technology, may also lack the access to educational resources to advance in the literacy programs. Lastly, family responsibilities and support can also be a tremendous barrier, especially for women.

As the situational barriers are often linked to the participation in the educational programs, the institutional barriers are viewed involving the issues of access and opportunities (Flynn et al., 2011). The authors identified institutional barriers as programs, practices, and procedures of the educational entity that may prevent adult learners from opportunities of education activities due to personal situational barriers that already exist. These barriers include the poor curriculum and the integration to the adult learner's personal lives or environment. This can be discouraging and may lead to early departure before completion.

The dispositional or motivational category in Flynn et al. (2011) included the relationships of the experiences; the social perceptions; and personal, academic, and job-related drives that can be connected to the barriers to education. Flynn et al. also noted that the past experiences in education or poor performance in high school can have a direct correlation to the lack of participation in adult interaction or engagement in the learning activities. The community also plays a role in solidifying the perceptions and negative attitudes about education. Thus, adult learners struggle to realize their potential as they try to understand the sense of the authentic self.

Hynes's (2014) study reviewed the multiple factors for leaving, dropping out, or experiencing interrupted enrollment in high school programs. This quantitative study involved a survey of over 3000 students across the United States, in which two-thirds of the respondents had dropped out of high school. The study was designed to answer questions regarding the reasons why a student left school and the circumstances that led to that decision. Furthermore, there were questions about once the student had left the school environment, how the student would describe the effects the decision had on them and their families. As indicated by respondents, 87% reported reasons of homelessness, 79% reported the situation of an incarcerated parent that forced the stop out experience, 50% reported moving to a new city or location and the challenges of changing or enrollment in a new school environment, and 11% noted that being in foster care and feelings of the unknown that lead to the decision for leaving high school.

Hynes (2014) indicated the trend of shared characteristics in the student responses that included the importance of relationships either from family or mentors (or lack

thereof) in the educational arena. Also, that those who were trying to navigate in a toxic environment, found themselves in the decision-making process to separate from the academic path. These students also noted the difficulty of juggling the issues of life and school. The findings also demonstrated the need for more opportunity to discuss these feelings, share the experiences, and feel part of something positive for the future. This study exemplifies the need to provide support and offer opportunities to build community interventions that lead to increased retention and completions of the high school diploma, understand the breadth and depth of the individual narratives regarding the experiences, and link studies with best practices that have produced student success. Hynes initiated an effort to align key strategies around the information from a stronger focus on the need to emphasize the recognition that the high school diploma is a stepping stone to college and stable career. Furthermore, Hynes noted that the missing link in previous research was the absence of exploring the students' characteristics to the reasons why a student leaves high school and how those reasons are articulated through the individual's experience.

Rabourn et al. (2015) set out to study the educational barriers of the adult learner. Given the rapid growth of the adult learner population and the lack of knowledge of the engagement required for successful educationally practices, Rabourn et al. thought it necessary to understand the characteristics of this population and the educational experiences and the barriers they face in pursuing higher education. Using the 2013 and 2014 administrations of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), Rabourn et al. reviewed the responses of over 146,000 adult learners to questions regarding the education engagement on both personal and institutional factors. The observations from



the study offered the following characteristics to adult learner success: (a) adult learners pursue flexible educational offerings compared to traditional-aged students, (b) adult learners were more likely to take online classes, enroll part-time, and have started their education at another institution, and (c) adult learners are diverse, in terms of experiences, backgrounds, and educational knowledge.

### **Adult Learner Success Factors**

In an effort to address the risk factor categories and characteristics, it is also important to understand the supports needed for success in lifelong learning, and the societal elements for the adult learner. There have been many studies involving the adult learner success factors including Davis (2014), Heddy, Sinatra, Seli, Taasobshirazi and Mukhopadhyay (2017), Knowles (1990), Ozaki (2016), Rothes, Lemos, and Goncalves (2017), and Wyatt (2011).

In the 1980's, Knowles further explored the term andragogy, which is defined as the art and science of adult learning and helped to shape the strategies involved in helping adult students learn. Increasing adult success and retention strategies have been integrated with the key assumptions on adult learning integrating andragogy foundations to help to shape the principles of adult learning (Knowles, 1990). Knowles's (1990) six principles have been well documented with the goal being to better understand the adult learner and the transformative process. They include the assumptions that: (a) adult learners are learning oriented and need to know the reason or the outcome of the learning process or content, (b) adult learners are activity oriented and prefer to be actively involved in the learning process, (c) adult learners are relevance oriented to the learning objectives and

the adult learner excels when able to integrate past experiences to the current knowledge together to make meaningful connections, (d) adult learners are goal oriented and are motivated by clear learning objectives that can be realized through the learning process, (e) adult learners thrive and can be highly productive in collaborative environments, and (f) adult learners are practical in the learning process and prefer to connect the process into real life situations for full application of the information. Knowles's six principles and the key focus of the motivation elements to the success of adult learning are integrated as foundation components in the works of Davis (2014), Heddy, Ozaki (2016), and Rothes, Lemos, and Goncalves (2017), and Wyatt (2011). The understanding of the key connections to the motivation elements of the adult learner help to shape the support systems for an environment of success.

As evidence to the importance of the motivational focus, Wyatt (2011) recommended systems that can support elements of reinforcement that can fully engage the adult learner and promote student success. Motivation for learning is the cornerstone of the learning process. What the motivation is and what that motivation means to the individuals and to their self-concept have been important research questions. Wyatt noted that there should also be elements of reinforcement that the learning process is leading to opportunities for the future, for the individual, and their families. Wyatt studied the relationship of student engagement and the commitment of support of the educational provider and its effect on student success through a qualitative case study approach. The research conducted involved focus group sessions and in depth personal interviews with the adult learners and asked questions on the relationship and influence with peers,

faculty, program environment, and participation in external events. The results of the qualitative case study approach indicated that the more the adult learner was engaged with the educational program the higher the levels of satisfaction and completion. Wyatt found that through the use of focus groups, interviews and the personal stories as told by the participants the engagement experience was essential in making the learning more meaningful to the adult learner. All of which is essentially critical to the needed integrated support systems and institutional commitment to student success at the program level.

Davis (2014) provided a representation of data that incorporates the student voice depicting their experience and transitions in the adult education program. Although previous studies involving adult learners reported data on the negative experiences and lack of confidence that can affect personal motivation, Davis (2014) set out to provide a view through student voice on the individual interpretations of the learning experience.

Through an ethnodrama research method, the Davis (2014) study consisted of 12 GED students, aged 18 – 25, enrolled in an adult education program. Using a semi structured interview process, the goal was to engage the students in the opportunity to share their personal story through their lived experience. The results provided key shared characteristics in the students' experiences including feelings of needing to be better prepared for the educational process, garnering a community of support, and integrating a foundation for an intrinsic positive self-talk mindset. The implications for the adult education providers was to be more aware of these challenges and provide strong wrap around services to help support success.

According to Ozaki (2016), the motivation and educational factors contribute to the integrated connections for the adult learner. These connections include the role of the external environments including the social, physical, and academic elements that contribute to the adult learner experience. These connections can also help the adult learners make sense of their education and contribute to the motivation and education decision making process. Ozaki (2016) explored the documented reasons for adult learners to return to an environment of education after an extended absence. These reasons were across the spectrum of intrinsically personal, family oriented, professional, and extrinsically focused with community perception-based decisions for engagement and involvement in an educational opportunity. Ozaki's research set out to explore the internal reasons and factors involved in the adult learners' decisions to seek out educational pathways after an extended absence and the concept of self was used as a key element for those reasons.

Ozaki (2016) reported that the concept of self was important for two main factors. First, the self can serve and function as incentives for future behavior and the cognitive bridge between who the individual is now and who the individual can be in the future. Additionally, the self-concept can serve as the connection between their motives and goals and the behavior that is needed to achieve those goals. Second, the motives are representation of the disposition toward the goal or to avoid negative incentives. Thus, the concept of self provides the context that motivation is not solely sufficient to enact behavior, but is set forward with a myriad of experiences, self-schemas, and developed strategies to set into motion.

This representation of the self for the adult learner as seen through Ozaki's (2016) research can include components that serve as both positive and negative effects that can be triggered or activated in certain environments, experiences, and situations. As an example, the adult learner can revert quickly to prior experience in learning based on the engagement in the educational environment (Ozaki, 2016). Educational entities must be aware of the complexities and set into motion avenues of support and success. In addressing the learning needs of the adult learner, both the contemporary and classical theories can be highly effective in understanding the complexities of this population. Research will need to continue to assess and comprehend the intricacies involving the characteristics of the learner. These elements are essential to the role of the learning experience, the readiness, educational orientation, and the intrinsic motivations for the learning process (Ozaki, 2016).

The engagement and the collaborative environment factors leading to student success assist in the understanding of how these experiences are transformative for the adult learner. Heddy et al. (2017) set out to explore the factors of persistence and retention in the adult learner population and measure the effectiveness of transformative experiences with the at-risk population. The study involved 124 participants who were described as at-risk due to baseline testing with an educational program. The researchers sought to measure the engagement perceptions and motivation value of the adult learners with the program services, the instructors, and the program environment. Data were collected using a variety of surveys involving questions on engagement, motivation, interest, and persistence intent. The findings indicated there was evidence of increased

learning, a more in-depth interest from the student in the learning process, and a spike in the motivation toward the academic environment with increased involvement and engagement with the program elements. Heddy et al. noted the impact of the transformative experience on the adult learner retention and continued academic success.

The development of motivational profiles and shared characteristics of adult learners is also helpful in the addressing strategies of success. A study conducted by Rothes et al. (2017) aimed to contribute to a better view of the motivation and shared characteristics with the sample of 188 adult learners with ages ranging from 25–64 years. These adult learners were also enrolled in short-term training modules with the educational programs for improved employability skill opportunities. To gain a more in depth understanding of the motivation and the implications for practice, program level strategy, and learning and achievement factors, the authors conducted a study involving adult learners primarily in an urban setting.

According to Rothes et al. (2017), motivation was a key element to understand students in terms of their engagement, satisfaction, and level of achievement in learning process. Motivation is often viewed with factors pertaining to both the intrinsic and extrinsic value elements. Intrinsic motivation refers to the reward gained through performance with achievement or interest; extrinsic motivation relates to the performance of an activity in terms of the consequences or rewards depending on the outcomes. According to Rothes et al., although intrinsic is considered the more positive form of motivation, the extrinsic rewards can have a stronger pull toward or away from the intended results.

The adult learner profile in terms of motivation continues the mindset of the understanding of the shared characteristics and elements of risk and success that are present (Rothes et al., 2017). Rothes et al. noted that the empirical study results regarding adult learner motivation are consistent to models of andragogy and self-directed learning and are led by internal rather than external factors. Furthermore, the adult learners' education level plays a role in the quantity and quality of intrinsic value to the motivation and those with lower levels of education viewed the extrinsic motives to be the driving force as in job-related and economic factors. The results showed that the adult learners with higher intrinsic motivation had a more positive performance with the academic experience as opposed to those with an extrinsic value as the primary motivation factor (Rothes et al.).

### **Program Options for Adult Learners**

According to World Education Organization (2017), a robust adult education system is an economic imperative for the economic prosperity of individuals and the nation. The United States is falling behind other countries and cannot compete economically without improving the skills of its workforce. High school graduates and dropouts will find themselves largely left behind in the coming decade as employer demand for workers with postsecondary degrees continues to surge. Program providers across the United States are working to find answers, funding sources, and to create results to help with the issue. One of those answers come in the form of upgrading existing programs and new innovations in educational delivery to meet these needs (DeSchryver & Dlugoleski, 2015). These options include the General Education

Development Test (GED), and other alternative education programs such as competency based and credit recovery pathways to move individuals to an educated and work ready status.

### **The General Education Development Test**

The GED has played a significant role in the U.S. for more than 70 years and is the most widely known pathway for adult education completion (American Council on Education, 2011). The GED program's origins stem from the need to find assistance in educating the members of the military after returning from World War II (American Council on Education, 2011). The success of the program swept the country in an effort provide an alternative to the high school diploma and support the continuance of education or employment opportunities. According to the GED Testing Service (2017), more than 18 million people have passed the GED test and have benefitted from the career and college readiness this program provides and supports.

Bowen and Nantz (2014) provided insight into the GED promise as an educational second chance and how literacy is a powerful economic resource. Their case study involved semi-structured interviews with seven GED seekers and recent GED recipients at Mercy Learning Center in Bridgepoint, Connecticut. The purpose of the research was to measure the economic and non-economic factors from the participants' perspective including the experience of the program and the students' motivations for seeking the educational opportunity. The economic factors stemmed from the employment opportunities that the high school equivalency provided the participants. The



non-economic elements identified included statements of enhanced self-esteem, happiness, and hope for the future.

Bowen and Nantz's (2014) research findings include the self-reported indicators of both the economic and non-economic factors having shared characteristics among the participants. The economic elements or goals of the adult learners include the prospect of employment or increased weekly wages and the possibility of continued education. The non-economic factors as reported by the participants improved self-esteem, social standing in the community, and being a role model for the family. Bowen and Nantz also note that all of these key elements solidify the importance of the diploma equivalency completion process and the true value of the GED.

The GED has gone through several iterations since the beginning in 1942 (American Council on Education, 2011). These changes became necessary as skills and educational pathways have changed to industry and post-secondary requirements. In 2014, the GED test went through rigorous change to incorporate the Common Core Standards and the College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Education (Larson & Gaeta, 2016). Additionally, the American Council on Education partnered with an education technology company to create the new online format and platform for test taking purposes. These changes resulted in reduced passage rates for those adult learners seeking the high school equivalency, leaving many adult learners with failed goals of diploma attainment (Mulhere, 2015).

Shaw, Tham, Hogle and Koch (2015), set out to analyze the new online format through the experiences of GED students in an effort to determine the program and

personal factors that influenced completion rates. To frame this study, Shaw et al. incorporated the measures of student expectations and the worth or valence of the program through the students' view (p.23). Using a mixed-methods research framework, Shaw et al. collected information from 12 participants through survey and personal interview approaches to capture student data and student insightful views through their own voice.

The program factor findings in Shaw et al. (2015) identified three themes: students' experience with the online curriculum, their connection with their teacher, and their interaction with peers. The students reported an overall satisfaction with the online curriculum noting that the online platform was user friendly and easy to navigate for course information. As to the teacher connection and interaction, the majority of the respondents noted that there was positive interaction with teacher encouragement and accessibility for questions and directions. Lastly, the peer interaction was seen as not important to the online students as they had very little contact and this made little difference to the academic experience (Shaw et al., 2015).

There were two main categories for the personal factor findings in Shaw et al. (2015): Motivation was key to student completion, and the combination of both the program and personal elements made the difference for success. The individual motivation or desire for completion was noted as the most important factor for student success in obtaining the GED, citing the intrinsic elements of the concept of self being central. Secondly, the combination of the program factors and self-motivation, became critical to the student completion and success. The experience with the curriculum,

connection with the teacher, and the self-motivation were essential even when contemplating dropping out of the program (Shaw et al., 2015).

The main implications from this study, according to Shaw et al. (2015), indicated that in this educational arena where technology is seen as central to the delivery of instruction, the human interaction and support of the intrinsic self-motivation elements are key to success. Also for adult literacy education practices, this balance of solid curriculum, educator support, and personal factors are key to empower students to be lifelong learners.

Historically, the GED has served as the main pathway for preparing the adult learner for the high school credential, but with over 30 million adults yet without this equivalency a great divide for workforce and post-secondary opportunities is produced (Rutschow & Crary-Ross, 2014). This void, according to Rutschow and Crary-Ross has pushed adult education practitioners and organizations to create educational innovations to provide new academic pathways for those non-graduates to obtain a high school credential and successfully make the transition to college and higher-level workforce training programs beyond the GED.

### **Alternative Education Programs for Adults**

Alternative educational programs for adults have emerged across the United States in an effort to address the dropout crisis and workforce needs. Carnevale et al. (2012) conducted research on best practice programming to address adult learning through certificates to meet employer demands in terms of educational attainment, required skills, and industry recognized credentials. The data used in this study included

the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY), which is a longitudinal panel study incorporating a series of surveys that collect up-to-date longitudinal information on income, labor force participation, government program participation, and general demographic information to in the country administered by the United State Census Bureau. Carnevale et al.'s report outlined the education requirements for the transformed set of skills and educational knowledge needed for the current and future workforce. Additionally, the report pointed to the need for competencies and evidence-based skill sets as essential for the job market to foster growth in the economy.

According to Ryan and Cox (2017), there was limited research available about how competency-based education is implemented, evaluated, and validated for student outcomes. Ryan and Cox set out to research data on a student's exposure to such programming and to investigate the outcomes. Ryan and Cox noted that states need to rethink the traditional policies of student advancement under the current Carnegie unit system, and turn "seat time" or credit hours into the evaluation of mastery and proficiencies for the learning process. The conceptual framework for this study was to operationalize and measure proposed essential elements of competency-based education. According to Ryan and Cox, their study offered one of the first empirically based attempts to provide information about students' exposure to competency based programming, collect data to support practitioners and policy makers for implementation and student outcomes. The research method involved the survey data collection from approximately 600 students from two high schools in the Northeastern United States. The survey was developed to capture the students' exposure to elements for learning and

instruction. These elements include the mastery-based progression, personalization, flexible assessment, and the development of specific skills. The findings reported the survey to be a reliable tool to investigate the students' responses to the exposure and provides context to implementation and instructional practice for future competency-based programs. Ryan and Cox (2017) concluded that although there was an increase to the national dialogue regarding competency-based education programs, empirical research still lagged behind. Additional research is essential to keep pace with policy, practice, and the development of student outcomes (p.21).

Book (2014) conducted a literature review on seven competency-based education programs in postsecondary education and compiled the lessons learned from the early adopters. Book reported that the need for innovation and change in higher education stems from the driving economic competitiveness in today's world with competency-based education the latest disruption in educational attainment. However, Book indicated that it also lacks empirical research on accessibility, transparency, affordability, and learning outcomes. Book described two basic models of competency-based education programs, one model is course-based with credit equivalency and the other involves the direct assessment type model. Both are essential with the lessons learned from the earlier program implementation and design. These key lessons included (a) assessing institutional readiness in terms of faculty engagement, internal academic leadership to lead the process; (b) strong and stable institutional top leadership support is critical success factor in initiating the program; (c) develop supportive data systems that assess learning and mastery of the competency; and (d) determine the credit equivalencies (if

appropriate) through prior learning assessment criteria that will move students forward in the educational path. These elements of lessons are the foundation to the development and implementation of the competency-based education program. Book concluded that although these lessons can be challenging, the need to assist students to alternative pathways to degree success is critical.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

In this chapter, I restated the problem and the purpose for the qualitative study on the perspectives of successful adult learners in two diploma completion programs in midwestern state. I provided the literature search strategy that I used to explore the empirical research and literature in relationship with the study. The conceptual framework for this study employed Bruner's (1960) theoretical mindset that learning is an active process integrating three areas of focus. These included the role of structure in learning; the readiness for learning; and the discussion of motives, values, and goals for the learning process. The conceptual framework also included Bandura's (1977) view that learning is in the context of social engagement. Bandura's social cognitive theory integrated the mindset that learning takes place through observation, imitation, and modeling of others with the focus on the attention, memory, and motivation. These perspectives provided context for the breadth and depth of the needs and services for the adult learner in their pursuit of lifelong learning opportunities, especially where key challenges have been experienced in the education process.

The literature review provided the foundation of the certain risk factors of the adult learner and reasons for leaving high school before completion. These factors

included the presence of stress, self-esteem, family responsibilities, and the emotional effect of poverty (Lemon & Watson, 2011; Flynn et al., 2011; Hynes, 2014; Rabourn et al., 2015). The literature also uncovered the key success factors for the adult learner that are critical in the support of the engagement in the learning process (Knowles, 1990; Wyatt, 2011; Davis, 2014; Ozaki, 2016; Heddy et al., 2017; Rothes et al., 2017).

The literature provided context to both of these adult learner factor components, but there was limited information and research on the perspectives from the learning experience. This study explored how adult learners describe their experience of successful completion of the education program options leading to secondary and post-secondary attainment and how these experiences are reflective of the adult learning theories. This study also explored the gap in the literature perspectives and context of successful adult learners' experiences in support of future program development and participation. This created a stronger understanding of the fundamental student values and position for an environment of success for the undereducated adult learner. In Chapter 3, I discussed the research design and rationale for the study, the role of the researcher, methodology components, and the issues for trustworthiness.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

My purpose in this study was to understand the experiences of adult learners who successfully completed their secondary education through either the ADP or the 22+ Program in a midwestern state. Findings from my study may help to inform the state leadership in the sustainability and continued development of the statewide educational approaches to reducing the number adults without high school diploma status. Using a basic qualitative interpretive approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), I interviewed adults who had successfully completed either program to explore their experiences in relationship to adult learning theories of Bruner (1960) or Bandura (1977). In Chapter 3, I present the research design and rationale, my role as the researcher, the methodology, the issues of trustworthiness, and the ethical procedures associated with the study.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

Research Question: How do successful students in either competency-based or credit recovery ADP describe their experiences about successful completion in the program?

The concept of interest is how adult learning principles relate to the experiences of successful participants in either the ADP or the 22+ Program from the perspective of adult learners who chose them. I used a basic qualitative interpretive approach, as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) to explore key elements of adult learning theories and the integration for program opportunities as learned through the students' perspectives. This study also informed strategy development for competency-based education and credit recovery programs used to address the educational skills required for



college and career ready adults. My purpose of choosing interviews over other forms of qualitative methods was reflective of the individual nature of the answers and the personal and private responses of the participants due to the emotional and psychological experiences of each student (Patton, 2002).

I applied a standardized open-ended interview approach to this study to gain the insight and perspectives of the experience of the high school completion process from the participants (Patton, 2015). A strength in my study was the use of qualitative research with its ability to provide in-depth descriptions to the study of interest. Qualitative research allows the researcher to gain insight to the rich meanings involved with understanding behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs of an issue or experience (Patton, 2002).

The phenomenological approach is similar to the basic qualitative approach for this study in the aspect that the research is relating to the experience of the participant. The difference is that phenomenological approach looks to the lived experiences through the same or similar phenomenal event (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). This approach is essential and appropriate for the description of the involvement through the students' view of the experience. However, this approach did not fit the research for this study. I was interested about the experiences of the adult learners with the successful completion of two different programs and not related to the complexity of their potential experiences.

The grounded theory approach offers the opportunity to provide a more in-depth understanding of the value of the experience and allows for the comparison of these experiences between programs (Patton, 2015). Patton also recommended that with the

grounded theory approach to have a sampling size of 20 to 50 participants, which was not consistent with my research. I did not choose this approach due to the sample size and the exploration of the understanding of the value of the experience compared to the perspectives of the participants. A narrative approach was also not a fit for this study (Patton, 2015). Through the interview process, I learned and listened about the experiences of the participants but did not interpret or restate these experiences with my own perspectives.

The basic qualitative study was the best fit for this study with the use of interviews of the participants who have successfully completed the ADP and the 22+ Program. The interview process was the best fit for this study with an open-ended question design to support the purpose of the study as to explore the perspectives of program involvement and the relationship to their lifelong learning goals.

### **Role of the Researcher**

For the purposes of this study, my role as the researcher was that of the interviewer, transcriber, and the data analyst. My role as the researcher was to ensure the validity and the credibility of the information gathered from the participants in the collection of data. I used researcher notes and audio tape to capture the statements of the participants accurately.

In my former role at a community college, where the two programs were hosted, I had the opportunity to meet and observe the accomplishments of many of the participants. I also observed those who started the program and were not successful through to a completion due to life issues, personal barriers, and ill preparation for the

rigor of the pathway. I became most interested in the strategies used from both personal and programmatic perspectives that assisted successful students to the end. To ensure the management of the potential biases, I worked with institutions that host these two programs for potential recruitment in one midwestern state where I did not have any personal or professional ties with the participants in the research.

### **Methodology**

In this section, I describe in detail the methodology, including the participant selection and the instrumentation for the study. I follow with the procedures for recruitment, participation, and the data collection. Last, I explain the data analysis plan for the research.

#### **Participant Selection Logic**

The participants for the study were the adult learners identified as successful completers of the midwestern state's ADP and 22+ Program awarding the high school diploma. I reached out to the program providers across the midwestern state for site approval. This process provided me with the letters of cooperation from two of the midwestern state's community colleges and an adult career center agreeing to their assistance in identifying eligible participants and forwarding an invitation email to the potential participants to consider. The invitation communicated the time commitment and participant role in the interview process and asked them to provide information related to contacting them to set up interviews. I forwarded informed consent forms to the interested participants for signature prior to the interview process. Finally, each participant confirmed the date and time for their interview.

According to Patton (2002), the saturation point for a qualitative study sample could be between one and 10. The data collection for this study involved a convenience sample of nine students from one of the two high school diploma completion programs to allow for potential saturation of experience with the programs.

### **Instrumentation**

In this study, I explored the perspectives of the student experience through the participation and completion in the midwestern state's ADP and the 22+ Program. Using a basic qualitative interpretive approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), I explored the perspective and context of successful students' experiences to support future program participation, create a stronger understanding of the fundamental student values, and position organizations for an environment of success for the undereducated adult learner. The literature review theme pattern incorporated the adult learner risk factors for continued or returning to the education pathways, the program of choice for completion of the high school diploma successfully completed, and the adult learner success factors that lead to the completion. The interview protocol (Appendix A) questions were developed in consultation with my committee using the social experiences model (Rubin & Rubin, 2011) framework and the learning theory perspectives of Bruner (1960) and Bandura (1977). Aspects of lifelong learning and their impact on the motivations and values of the adult learner were also considered. In addition, I confirmed the questions by checking the topic's importance and how each question is valued by the information it produces to the area of interest (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). This was an essential piece for the overall study to impart meaningful data related to the adult learner population.

The interview protocol began with an overview of the study and affirmed the participant's understanding and comfort in moving forward with the interview. I used the interview questions to lead to the motivations for entering the program of choice and the experiences throughout the accomplishment. I also used the interview questions to explore the challenges experienced and the strategies used to overcome these possible barriers for completion. The final stages of the interview process included questions on the participant's future aspirations and program recommendations that can be used for improvements for further development.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

After the receipt of the letters of cooperation from the three participating sites and Walden University IRB approval (No. 03-19=18-0137386), the recruitment process began with the invitation to participate being forwarded by the site contact person to graduates of the two community college programs and one adult career center. The participant procedure used a convenience sample of nine students from either of the two programs. An informed consent was emailed to each student who responded to the invitation for participation with approximately 3 days and time of availability for the interview process. Upon receipt of the signed consent, I scheduled the telephone interview at the comfort and convenience of the participant.

The data collection process began with the scheduled telephone interviews conducted by me with each participant based on a mutually agreed upon time in the course of a preferred 2-month timeframe to ensure consistency and timeliness for the participants. I recorded the interviews in a two-pronged approach with both my research

notations that I kept and the audio recording using a hand-held recording device throughout the interview process. In addition, I kept a research log to record each step of my research process. As indicated in the interview protocol, I first explained my role as a PhD student and that this research was part of my work for the dissertation. I then explained the purpose of this research concerning their successful completion of either the ADP or the 22 + program. I then proceeded with the interview questions to explore the experiences of each participant of participation with the midwestern state's programs.

Following each interview, I transcribed the interview process. I sent each participant a copy of their transcript for review, additional comments, and corrections to be returned to me within a 5-day timeframe. I also adhered to all regulations approved by the Walden University IRB processes, which were essential to the ethical standards and responsibilities for the research study. I offered each participant who started the participation process a \$20.00 Amazon gift card as an expression of appreciation regardless of whether they completed the participation through the review and return of their interview transcripts.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

In this basic qualitative study, I transcribed each participant's interview. To ensure accuracy of the data collected, I sent the transcription and asked that was checked by the participant. I reviewed each interview transcript to identify the concepts and themes that emerged from the description of the student's experience. I began to analyze participant responses from each of the three programs using a framework based on the learning theory perspectives of Bruner (1960) and Bandura (1977). I began the coding

process to seek out the themes that emerged from repetitive words, phrases, statements, and experiences that are similar among the responses, as suggested by Rubin and Rubin (2011). The coding process is best described as the finding and labeling of the concepts, themes, and examples in the transcripts that relate to the research question (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). This method helped to identify themes and view common threads of information from the interview process. This helped me to understand the flow of the questions to the responses as well as understand the deeper thought process behind the participants' experiences to gain the rich context of their responses in that program's process (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

Furthermore, the use of the coding process substantially aligned with the interview categories and provided purposeful ways of collecting the feeling, expressions, and experiences from the participants. This was essential to the ongoing communication of the research findings and the themes that emerged. Last, my research log was essential at every step to better understand the process and the steps taken to reach consensus and conclusions in the review of the information.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Four strategies ensure the trustworthiness in qualitative research, which include the credibility, transferability, dependability, and the confirmability criteria of the research (Shenton, 2004). In my role as the researcher, it was essential that I incorporate these criteria and ensure the trustworthiness of this study at each step of the research process. For each of these strategies, I have outlined by chosen approach to address the issues of trustworthiness.

**Credibility**

Using the Shenton (2004) model and the Guba (1981) construct, the credibility function was essential to my study and for future application of the research and information. Guba used the positivist investigator model to learn, integrate, and use information most effectively and has been viewed as a substantial model. In particular, Guba's constructs indicate that the credibility criteria is most often associated with the internal validity of the research process. Furthermore, it helps to indicate the methodology, the sources, and the review of the participants for the authenticity of their responses. I employed a transcript verification process to ensure the accuracy of the data being collected from each interview. Additionally, I asked each participant to review whether the transcribed interview captured correct information and accurately represented their intention. My research log documenting the interview process and the interview data from three different programs provided triangulation for credibility. According to Patton (2015), triangulation of different sources of data that provides for the coherent justification for themes, then this process can be claimed as adding to the validity of the study.

**Transferability**

Transferability refers to the external validity of the study (Guba, 1981). Transferability refers to whether the information could be used similarly with other groups in similar programs in other locations. I involved two community colleges and one adult career center in a midwestern state that host one of the adult diploma option programs. Two institutions host the ADP; the third hosts the 22+ Program. I had intended



a sample size of five from each program, though the final result was six from the former and three from the latter. The shared characteristics of the participants were similar as to the program intent, hence diploma achievement for the successful completion of each program of interest which was related to the research questions in the interview process (Patton, 2015).

### **Dependability**

Guest, MacQueen, and Namey (2012) defined dependability in qualitative research as the stability of data over time and over conditions. Dependability can be compared to reliability in quantitative studies. In other words, dependability is an evaluation of the quality of the integrated processes of data collection, data analysis, and theory generation. These criteria address the issue of repeatability and if the same research methods with the same participants would obtain similar results. My research design and implementation were intended as confirmation of dependability with the use of an audit trail for each interview to document the process in detail and evaluate the effectiveness of the research process. I kept individual notes on each interview as well as kept the log of the audio tapes to ensure quality standards were implemented and integrated with each interview and transcript verification process.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to the quality of the results produced by an inquiry in terms of how well they are supported by informants (members) who are involved in the study and by events that are independent of the inquirer (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). This refers to the steps that need to be present to ensure that the research results

communicate the perspectives of the experiences of the participants and the preferences of the researcher (Shenton, 2004). To address this criterion, I employed the process of transcript verification, the audit trail, and my own personal reflection in my research log to support the confirmability criteria.

In conclusion, when a research experience can produce the credibility of the subject, the external validity of dependability, the transferability to future programming opportunities, and confirmation of effective information and research, the outcomes are viewed to have validation. These elements of trustworthiness were integrated and embedded in every step of the research process for this study. The process provides the proof, evidence, and demonstration of the information that leads to the support for future programming (Shenton, 2004, Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012).

### **Ethical Procedures**

Rubin and Rubin (2011) wrote that ethical considerations are critical in being respectful of the nature of the questions and the outcomes or output of the information. The appropriate approvals were obtained, including the cooperation from the three institutions and approval from Walden University's IRB, as well as the informed consent from each of the participants. The recruitment of participants, the interview process, and the coding of the information continues to be held confidentially and will not be shared with the institutions and other participants. The use of pseudonyms was employed and the assurance of privacy was explained through the interview protocol and other communications with the participants. All recordings and transcriptions will continue to be stored in a secure location in my home and only shared with the committee members

as instructed. The data will be stored for the 5-year period and then they will be destroyed to ensure the overall confidentiality of the research study.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 3, I shared the proposed research design and rationale for the basic qualitative interview approach, the role of the researcher, and the methodology. I also addressed the issues of trustworthiness and the ethical procedures for review. After proposal approval, I secured the IRB authorization and proceeded to the recruitment of participants for the research process. In Chapter 4, I reviewed the details of the participants, the data collection process, and the results of the interview responses.

## Chapter 4: Results

My purpose in this basic interpretative qualitative research study was to understand the experiences of adult learners who successfully completed their secondary education through either the ADP or the 22+ Program in a midwestern state. The study may help to inform the state leadership in the sustainability and continued development of the statewide educational approaches to reducing the number adults without high school diploma status.

### **Research Question**

The research question related to the experiences of successful participants in either the ADP or the 22+ Program from the perspective of adult learners who chose these programs.

Research Question: How do successful students in either competency-based or credit recovery ADP describe their experiences about successful completion in the program?

I used a basic qualitative interpretive approach, as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) to explore key elements of adult learning theories and the integration for program opportunities as learned through the students' perspectives. In Chapter 4, I present the demographics of the participants in the study, the data collection methods, the description of the data analysis, and the evidence of trustworthiness processes for the conducted research. I close Chapter 4 with the research results describing the themes and patterns found in the interview responses.

### **Setting**

For the setting, I conducted each of the interviews via telephone conversation at a day and time convenient for the participants. I telephoned each participant at the chosen time and began by reviewing the purpose of the research, the steps to ensure confidentiality, and provided the next steps following the conclusion of the interview process. I then asked if there were any questions and confirmed the participant's readiness to continue and option to discontinue at any time. I also confirmed the participant's comfort level and agreement for the use of a hand-held voice recorder and began the interview.

I did not identify any conditions that would have any negative or undue influence with the interview process. Furthermore, each interview was consistent in the questions asked but uniquely different due to each individual participant's personal experience and his or her reasons for seeking the diploma program. There were commonality and significant similarities among the participants with the answers to key areas of the interview process in terms of the motivation, the challenges experienced, and in their strategies employed for completion regardless of which diploma program they completed.

Table 1

*Demographics of Participants With Program Choice and Highest Grade/Last Year**Attended High School*

| Participants<br>(pseudonym's<br>applied) | Gender and age<br>(years) | Program choice | Highest grade/last<br>year attended |
|--|---------------------------|----------------|-------------------------------------|
| Rita                                     | Female, 26                | ADP            | Senior/2009                         |
| Kelly                                    | Female, 32                | ADP            | Junior/2003                         |
| Linda                                    | Female, 32                | ADP            | Senior/2003                         |
| Alice                                    | Female, 32                | ADP            | Senior/2003                         |
| Mark                                     | Male, 39                  | ADP            | Senior/1996                         |
| Ned                                      | Male, 43                  | ADP            | Junior/1992                         |
| Rachael                                  | Female, 50                | 22+ program    | Junior/1986                         |
| Ruth                                     | Female, 37                | 22+ program    | Junior/1998                         |
| Rex                                      | Male, 23                  | 22+ program    | Senior/2012                         |

**Data Collection**

The data collection process involved participants who were the adult learners identified as successful completers of one of the midwestern state's ADPs or 22+ Programs awarding the high school diploma. This process was confirmed with the letters of cooperation from the midwestern state's two community colleges and the adult career center granting approval and authorization for the research setting. With IRB approval (No. 03-19=18-0137386), the three institutions assisted in the identification process of the eligible participants and then the institutional program coordinators forwarded an invitation via email for interview consideration to potential participants. The invitation communicated the time commitment and participants' role in the interview process and

included my email and telephone contact information. The participants then contacted me with their interest in participating in an interview through email and telephone conversations. I forwarded the informed consent form to the interested participants for signature prior to the interview process. Finally, each participant confirmed the date and time for the interview, which took place during week-ends and evenings to be most convenient for the participant.

The data collection for this study involved a convenience sample of nine participants from the adult diploma completion programs, specifically six from an ADP and three from a 22+ Program. The data collection process took approximately 2.5 months to complete.

I recorded the data in a two-pronged approach using my hand-written notes and transcripts of audio recordings made by using a hand-held recording device throughout the interview process. Following each interview, I transcribed the interview dialogue. I sent each participant a copy of their transcript for review, additional comments, and corrections. I asked that the reviewed transcript be returned to me within a 5-day timeframe. I adhered to all regulations required by Walden's IRB. Each participant who started the participation process received a \$20.00 Amazon gift card as an expression of appreciation for participation. The recruitment of participants, the interview process, and the coding of the information was held in strict confidentiality and was not shared with their institutions and other participants. The use of pseudonyms has been used and the assurance of privacy was explained through the interview protocol. All recordings and transcriptions remain stored in a secure location in my home and only shared with the

committee members as instructed. I will store the data for the 5-year period and then I will destroy the data to ensure the overall confidentiality of the research study. In addition, I kept a research log to notate each next step in the research process, including my reflective perspectives, the interview process, the email communication, interview schedule, transcription completed, and the date the Amazon card was mailed to the participants.

There were two primary variations to the data collection plan as originally planned. First, it was necessary to expand the preferred 2-month timeline for the data collection to be 2.5 months. This was due to the IRB approval process with a delayed response from one of the community college partners. Also, there were nine participants instead of the originally preferred 10 for the interview process. The program coordinators did reach out to the successful completers multiple times, but because of incorrect or changed telephone numbers, email, and home addresses, many participants were not reachable to be invited for possible participation. In addition, although I completed nine interviews, I attempted 14 actual appointments for interviews, but five individuals were not available at the time they scheduled their interview and did not respond to further attempts to reschedule for unknown reasons.

### **Data Analysis**

In this basic qualitative study, after completing the interview and the transcription process, I set out to identify the concepts and themes that emerged from the description given in the interviews of the participants' experiences. I analyzed participant responses using a framework based on the learning theory perspectives of Bruner (1960) and



Bandura (1977). To ensure accuracy of the data collected, I sent the transcription to the participant for their review.

For the coding process, I reviewed the transcripts to seek out emerging themes that were coming from repetitive words, phrases, statements, and experiences that were similar among the responses, as suggested by Rubin and Rubin (2011). Using a color coding process, I highlighted the repetitive and similar responses to find key patterns and to help in identifying emerging themes. The coding process was described as the finding and labeling of the concepts, themes, and examples in the transcripts that relate to the research question (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). This method helped to identify common threads of information from the interview process. Following this path, it helped me to understand the deeper thought process behind the participants' experiences to gain the rich context of their responses in that program's process (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

The use of the coding process substantially helped me to better understand the participants' feelings, expressions, and individual experiences through the successful completion of the diploma program. Lastly, my research log was essential at every step to better understand the process and the steps taken to reach consensus and conclusions in the review of the information.

### **Themes and Codes Related to the Research Question**

In this section, I provide an overview of the themes and codes identified in the data and that related to the data analysis and the research question. The codes that represent the aspects of the data help to capture the essence of the emerging themes that

inherently shaped the consistent theme descriptions of the student's experience in the successful completion of the chosen program.

The first set of codes included the theme of student's *connection to the program*. The words and phrases that illustrated that connection included *researching on what to do, where to go, and looking for something totally different from the GED*. Also, *advisor or GED counselor assistance* was consistently used in connection with choosing the program. Other phrases included: *tried GED before, needed help, and aged out of traditional programming* that lead to the connection to the Adult Diploma and 22+ Programs.

The second theme of *intrinsic and extrinsic motivations* in support of their successful completion emerged with the following key words and phrases that depicted the strength of this area. The intrinsic motivators included *needed to do this for me, I need a better job, always frustrated, self-esteem, no more lying, always wanted to complete, respect, and once in a life time opportunity*. The motivation themes that indicated the extrinsic aspect were indicated by the following phrases: *needed to do this for my children and family, as a promise to my late parent, and supervisor support*.

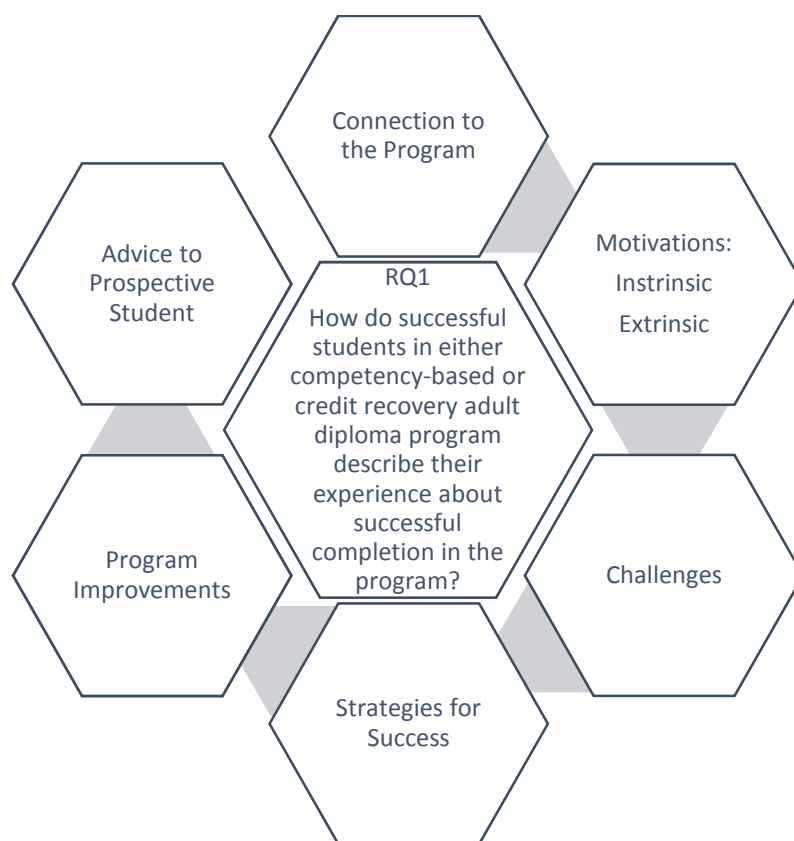
The participants spoke of specific challenges that were presented in this journey and the specific strategies for success that were used to move them to the end. The codes for the third theme of *challenges* were indicated through the following key words and phrases: *the program was hard, it would have been easy to quit, balancing time, family responsibilities and issues, transportation, childcare, learning to study again, stress of failing, and work schedule*.

The *strategies for success* were equally present and identified through the coding process, representing the fourth theme. The participants expressed the following phrases that supported this theme: *positive mindset, second chance to complete, remember why I need to do this, payoff in the end, push forward, I was learning again, family support, excellent and caring teachers, and it was ok to ask for help.*

Through the use of consistent interview questions regarding suggestions for program improvements, the codes that supported the fifth theme of *program improvements* included the following: *better information about the education programs available, better communication on credits needed, increased communication on program requirements, be more personable, more marketing at libraries and community centers, better engagement with other students, more access to advisors, and reduce advisor changes.* There were also several responses that shared the following views: *no changes needed, the program was perfect, and best program for students seeking diploma completion.*

For the final theme of *advice to a potential student*, the code phrases included the following: *never give up, stay focused, give it your all, absolutely do it, rewarding, people will look at you differently, and look where you want to be, look where your end goal is, and then go do it.* The participants were eager to encourage others to seek out diploma completion opportunities and share his or her feelings of accomplishment.

Figure 1 is a visual depiction the themes and their relationship to the research question.



*Figure 1. Themes.*

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Four strategies ensure the trustworthiness in qualitative research, which include the credibility, transferability, dependability, and the confirmability criteria of the research (Shenton, 2004). In the collection of the data and in the data analysis process, I incorporated these criteria as to ensure the evidence in trustworthiness of this study.

#### **Credibility**

I incorporated a transcript verification process to ensure the accuracy of the data being collected from each interview. Following the interview and transcription process, I asked each participant to review the transcript to confirm that the information presented was representative of their experiences. I also used a research log to document the

interview process and the interview data from the three different programs which provided triangulation for credibility.

### **Transferability**

I involved two community colleges and one adult career center in a midwestern state that host one of the adult diploma option programs. Two institutions were hosting the ADP and the other was hosting the 22+ Program. The actual sample size resulted in six from the ADP and three from the 22+ program. The interview questions along with key probe questions helped to gather rich descriptions of their experiences and expressions of successful completion.

### **Dependability**

Guest, MacQueen, and Namey (2012) defined *dependability* in qualitative research as the stability of data over time and conditions. I used dependability criteria to address the issue of repeatability and the use of the same research methods with the all the participants. It was my intention to use the research design and implementation as confirmation of dependability with the use of an audit trail for each interview to document the process in detail and evaluate the effectiveness of the research process.

### **Confirmability**

To address this criterion, I used the process of transcript verification, the audit trail, and my own personal reflection in my research log to record my steps in the interview process and identify any bias in my process of understanding the data. Throughout the research process, I found that the validation of the findings from the interviews to be credible by participants who reviewed their own transcripts for errors or

omissions. My own research notes documented my thinking and check my biases as I carried out the interview and coding process.

## **Results**

I found the results of the data analysis through the interview process of nine participants who had successfully completed either the competency based or credit recovery diploma program. The participants described their experience with the program, the connection to the program, extrinsic and intrinsic motivations, challenges that were experienced through the program, and strategies for success that fostered the completion process. Additional themes that emerged through the interview process involved participant suggestions for program improvements and advice for new potential students considering one of the two programs. The description of these aforementioned themes about these experiences were rich and thick with emotions as evident through the interview process and responses to the research question: How do successful students in either competency-based or credit recovery ADP describe their experience about successful completion in the program?

### **Theme 1: Connection to the Program**

The program choice and connection stemmed from the actual program available with the institution and location. In addition, for students choosing the 22+ Program, the decision was based on the number credits required to complete diploma status. The recommended limit is five high school credits required for completion with this program. In addition, although each student's reflection on the how and why they were seeking a diploma program was unique, there was consistency in that there was a life struggle that

moved the individuals to seek an opportunity to complete their education. The situations included loss of employment, adverse issues with a personal relationship, or financial insecurities. All nine participants reported that they were seeking information on the GED program when they first became aware of the alternative options. As example, Rachael was seeking information about the GED program and stated:

I was actually searching on Google one day just trying to get more information about the GED because I was at a point where I wanted a career ... needed to be able to stand on my own two feet on a single income.

Rita noted that she had been searching for information on a diploma program when she saw something on Facebook about a program that was going to start for adults needing the diploma. Rita shared, "I followed the link for information ... it just stayed in my mind. I just haven't ever forgot about that post and once I saw that it was going to take place, I took action."

Ruth was seeking the GED because of a job loss due to not having a high school diploma and shared, "I knew it was going to catch up with me one day, I just didn't know when, and then it did." Mark described the day he was laid off work, and how that moved him to begin the search again for the GED pathway. He shared, "It really got me thinking, what am I going to do? I have no education, I have nothing."

Rex shared that his search connected him to the 22+ Plus Program. Originally seeking information on the GED, when he learned about the new initiated program. Rex

stated, “They really helped me out a lot ... I was able to come back (to school) and study. I really appreciated this program.”

Ned shared that he saw an advertisement on television and decided to learn more about the program. Ned stated, “I figured, I am already struggling in the job, not having an education, see what I can do to better my standards.” These searches provided each of them information about new programming in this midwestern state regarding the Adult Diploma and the 22+ Program as options for diploma completion opportunities.

## **Theme 2: Motivations**

The nine participants described the distinctive factors that were motivational as to their decision to seek program opportunities and take the steps to get enrolled, oriented, initiate the education process, and complete the program. These factors as defined as intrinsic and extrinsic influences shaped their determination to immerse themselves in this new pathway.

**Intrinsic factors.** In their own words, the participants shared the unique internal motivational drive each of them possessed to enter, persist, and complete the program of choice. As an example, Ruth described her intrinsic inspiration:

I wanted to do this for myself. It was just something that my self-confidence ... it hasn't been there without it (the diploma) and it was always something in the back of my mind, and I knew I had to do it. I have done so much lying and it began to catch up with me. High school's not optional in this world. You have to have it. It is the first question on every job application, it is required.



Rita described the opportunity as, “This was my second chance, and that I had to take advantage of this opportunity.” She shared her mindset as, “You’re going to get this! That was my motivation ... knowing that you should never just give up. As an adult ... that was the example I want to leave for my child.”

Ned shared his initial experience with an unsure mindset in the beginning of the program. He stated:

Yeah, at first it started, I was like, okay, maybe it was just something I was going to get into and be like, oh, I'm done with it and just walk away from it, but there's just something in me, just keep going. Let's get through it. Let's get something to done for once in our life and that's where I ended.

Kelly described the program as a “once in a lifetime opportunity to be able to get my diploma” and noted that she wanted to be a role model for her daughter. Kelly cited this internal drive was the motivating factor to enter and complete the program.

**Extrinsic factors.** The participants also described the extrinsic factors that were present through the program experience that help to move them to the completion process. The participants noted it was the praise, constant reassurance, and reinforcement from family members including spouses, siblings, children, and grandchildren.

The extrinsic factors that influenced Ruth included the inspiration and encouragement from the people that were closest to her in this path. Ruth shared that her son was a significant motivating factor as well as her sister, mother, and all her friends as they were supportive and offered to help in anyway.

Alice shared that not having the high school diploma had always bothered her for years. She stated, “I just never thought that I would have one. It just seemed like every time I tried to accomplish something, something would happen and I would stop.” Alice then described a conversation with her son that motivated her to seek this opportunity. She stated:

My son played a major part in me initiating getting my diploma, because he asked me ... Mom, why do I have to go to school? I said, you have to go to school because you need a job, and have to have a career, and it's to better yourself. It's always good to learn and educate yourself, because you have to be a grown up someday, and have a family. It is very important for you to have a high school diploma. My son then asked to see my diploma, and I couldn't show him. It just lit a spark in me ... that is what I need to do to lead by example.

Rachael also described how not having her diploma was always on her mind.

She stated:

It always frustrated me that I never completed high school. I think the biggest drive was that I have six (6) grandchildren ...and it's important that they know that school and education is important. So, I wanted to be an example. When my oldest grandson didn't understand me going back to school, we didn't talk to them about it, because we didn't want them to think it was easy to drop out. But when I got my diploma, I had a long talk with him. Don't do what I did, but at least I could make it right in the end.

Rita shared that extrinsically, it was her husband, brother, and best friend that helped to shape this motivation throughout the program. Rita also expressed her thanks to her supporters for their incredible encouragement at each step as well.

Linda noted that her supervisor at work was incredibly supportive of her diploma school work and offered to help her study. She also credited her aunt for encouraging her at every step. Linda stated:

I had just lost my grandma in the beginning of the year. I had taken care of her. That's when I was going to go back to school to get my diploma. She (her aunt) was like, all right, let's do this. She was really supportive of me.

Rex, the youngest participant in the research, described his key motivation was strengthened to seek the diploma opportunity from his mother. He shared his thoughts as "My Mom, before she passed, she told me to keep looking forward to my future. I could always feel her support around me, it helped to push me forward.

### **Theme 3: Challenges**

The participants all shared that the successful completion did come with its set of challenges. These challenges included the need to use positive time management between work, family, and school work; to learn how to study again; and to turn negative energy into positive fuel to keep moving the progress forward. Many of the participants noted there were times they considered the prospect of giving up on the dream of a high school diploma. Ned spoke of one of those times and shared "Just the constant struggle, there were a couple times going through the program where I wanted to take the laptop and throw it across the basement floor."

Kelly described her challenges and struggles with transportation and child care. She shared “you had to worry about getting there on time and you have to get the kids to school and day care.” Kelly also shared the emotional reality that although she was blessed with a lot of support around her, there was a psychological reliance for several years within her personal relationship. Kelly noted that while she was working diligently to achieve diploma status, this caused tremendous stress on the relationship and fears of Kelly’s newfound independence. This did lead to an eventual separation. When Kelly reflected on that experience, she noted that also empowered her ambition to complete.

Rita described her experience as challenging due to a loss in the family while she was in the program. She shared “It was actually very challenging ... it was a bit of a longer process than I thought. I kept halting, but I had to remember why I needed to do this to keep going.” Rachael stated there were times when she would become “frustrated, more or less, I struggled getting through some of the classes. I wanted to change some of my classes but couldn’t. I just wanted to get it done.”

#### **Theme 4: Strategies for Success**

As noted by the participants, these challenges also lead to strategy development for success strategies that either were learned through life lessons or newly formed approaches to successfully complete the diploma program. Several participants shared their processes of self-awareness, a newfound level of personal strength, keeping a positive attitude, and having the will to push through the program to the end.

Alice reflected on how in the beginning of the program, she was struggling with math and reading and needed to keep telling herself “to not give up when I was failing.”

She went on to share about the day she got to the end of the program and heard her instructor tell her “you are all complete, 100%.” Alice said she yelled “Wow, I actually did it. Like I really got through it.”

Rex shared how his strategy of keeping a positive mindset throughout the program helped to move to a completion. Rex stated, “I think ... something really nice, because that makes you think of yourself ... if you want to be professional ... do it on your own.”

Mark used a “buddy system” approach to his strategy for success. In the beginning of the program, Mark sought out to partner with one other classmate to develop a plan for completion. They took turns driving each other to class which helped to ensure attendance. Mark stated:

There were some days that I didn’t feel like I wanted to go, but since we rode together, I knew I had too. When I drove, I knew I had to get him to school. Together, we did not miss one minute of class. We were never late. We never took a day off. We always stayed over. Nobody has time to do it right, but everybody has time to do it twice. Well, I didn’t want to do it twice again, so we just did it right. The buddy system worked the best.

Kelly described the challenges in her life helped to fuel her strategy for success and stated:

I think it honestly gave me the strength to finally do it. I didn’t want to deal with the stressful situation, but I knew me getting my diploma ... I

knew I could be my own breadwinner of the house and I didn't have to settle.

Rachael talked about how she started to really push herself in the last couple of months of the requirements. She found the coursework interesting and stated, "Just the fact that I was back to learning ... that was so good. It was just the kind of a refresher I needed and I loved every minute."

Ruth shared her strategy for success in this way:

I can't begin to tell you how proud of myself I am, because it took a lot of concentration, a lot of sitting at that computer. It was kind of rough for me because I wanted to pull out so many times. I wasn't getting a couple of things, but I had support from my family, and my sisters. You know, it just turned out ... for the most part it turned out all good, so I am happy now. I feel better about myself, and on to the next journey.

The empowering effects on the participants' ability to build strategies to work through the many challenges and to lead them to a pathway for success was demonstrated through the words and experiences.

### **Theme 5: Program Improvements**

In the interview process, I asked two follow-up questions to gain understanding from the participants' experience what suggestions they had for program improvements, what advice they would give to a prospective student considering the diploma options programs, and if they were program leader what they would do differently. The majority of the responses from the participants noted no recommended changes to the program.

Many followed with the sentiments of their experience with the education pathways, and with the staff were primarily positive.

There were suggestions for improved marketing and advertising of the two programs to help leverage awareness of the possibilities for these alternative options. Students in the ADP shared that the positive opportunities for cohort learning and team building expectations. One program had created a Facebook community page where students could communicate, share, and create a sense of belonging with the group as a whole. Ned shared “I’m still Facebook friends with a couple of them, where I’m actually friends with a couple of them on there too, so we try and stay in touch.”

There were also few suggestions for change mentioned by those who completed the 22+ Program. Most participants were satisfied with the online learning platform, the ability to work at their own pace, and the program advisors that they worked on a consistent basis. One notable suggestion was to have more access to the required test materials and possibly an advisor in the off hours of the evening and early morning. Participants recognized that the program may not be in operation 24 hours a day but that in addition to his or her education responsibilities, the participants were also accountable to work and family. Often, they found themselves doing the school work late at night or early in the morning, which created concerns to meeting the course requirements.

#### **Theme 6: Advice to a Prospective Student**

The question regarding the participant’s advice to the prospective student was the following: How would you describe your overall experience to the next adult learner interested in entering the program? The follow-up question then was asked, what you

would have wanted to know before starting the program. Also, what advice would you suggest to a prospective student?

All participants provided input. Mark stated “My experience was fantastic! It was hard, but you need to stick with it, pay attention, and you can get it done.”

Linda provided the following advice:

I would tell them to stop and think where you want to see yourself in a year. Do you want to be stuck in the same job, or do you want to be in a different field, a different career? I would suggest look where you want to be, look where your end goal is, and then pick what career you go into and get your diploma.

Rita also shared her thoughts on successful strategies for the diploma seeking student. She expressed input by the following:

I think that you should know to just never give up and make sure that once you're involved in this program that you are ... you stay focused and give it your all. At the end of the day, it's going to be super rewarding and very beneficial to you.

Kelly provided her thoughts to the question as the following:

It's the best thing I did in my life. It's so worth it. My children definitely look at me different now. People look at you different. It's the best thing they could do, if you don't have a diploma.



Rachael shared “I would advise absolutely to do it, and put your best foot forward, don’t hesitate another day ... because at the end it just makes you feel very accomplished.”

### **Final Thoughts**

Several of the participants shared their final perspectives on their experience with the program and their successful completion. All the participants shared the sense of personal pride, and how this accomplishment has been the motivating factor for new opportunities in terms of employment and possible continued education. Ned, Mark, and Linda have already enrolled into either a new training or a post-secondary program. Besides specific suggestions for program improvement, all the participants, regardless of program completed shared similar experiences.

Rachael noted that she was grateful the program and added that perhaps the timing of her participation was a good fit for her life today. Rachael stated:

To be real honest, I’m very grateful I was afforded the opportunity to do this. I am, maybe there was a reason all those years I didn’t get my GED done, because not having that diploma always bothered me, and I mean that from the bottom of my heart. Maybe there was a reason I didn’t, because my timing just wound up so amazingly perfect, and I can say honestly, I’m just very grateful that I had the opportunity to do it. I am very much proud of that.

Ruth shared her final thoughts as to the belief of the blessing that the program has been for her today and her future. Ruth stated:

My tears are tears of joy. I get all emotional when I talk about it because I think it's still fresh to me. My diploma is setting right here on my dresser. I just keep looking at it like, I can't believe that it says my name. This has been a blessing, everything about it, and I really mean that.

Alice plans to share her experience with hopes to help others in achieving diploma status within her community. Alice also stated:

Basically, it has changed my life and I really thank the program and God for it coming across my path and me not giving up. I now have something I never thought I would have. This was a long, lifetime struggle. People have insecurities about their weight or hair. I was very insecure about not having a high school diploma. Everybody around me has careers ... it's like a weight lifted off of me. I don't have to worry about it anymore.

### **Summary**

The data analysis of the research lead to the six themes that provided the rich and thick descriptions from the participants on their successful experience with the two styles of ADPs. Those themes were expressed through the process of getting connected to the program and what lead them to the search process. The participants' expressed their individual motivations both intrinsic and extrinsic that kept them involved with the learning process. Although recognizing there were challenges in this path to completion, the participants' shared their strategies for success and the personal insights about perseverance, self-awareness of strength, and the sense of empowerment for their success. Lastly, the participants' provided their perspectives through this experience with

suggestions for possible improvements that would inform program providers, offered personal advice or words of wisdom to prospective students, and gave their final thoughts on their overall experience with the program of choice and their success.

In Chapter 5, I will compare the research findings to the empirical literature described in Chapter 2, provide analysis and interpretation in context to the conceptual framework, and describe the limitations to the study and recommendations for future research. I will also describe the positive social change both from the individual and societal perspective from the research findings.

## Chapter 5

My purpose in this basic interpretative research study was to understand the experiences of adult learners who successfully completed their secondary education through either the ADP or the 22+ Program in a midwestern state. The nature was a basic qualitative interpretive research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) method to allow for the exploration and focus on the students' experience in a diploma completion program. The study may also inform others in the field regarding continued strategy development for competency-based education and credit recovery programs used in this midwestern state to address the educational skills required for the demand of college and career ready adults. The research question that guided the study was: How do successful students in either competency-based or credit recovery ADP describe their experiences about successful completion in the program?

The key findings with the participant descriptions of their experiences were unique as to the reasons for seeking and enrolling into the diploma program. However, parallel narratives emerged that related to the struggles and the emotional reasons that moved the participants to seek an opportunity to complete their education. These reasons included loss of employment, adverse issues with a personal relationship, or financial insecurities.

The themes that emerged from the interview process were the participants' connection to the program, extrinsic and intrinsic motivations, challenges that were experienced through the program, and strategies for success that fostered the completion process. Additional themes that were ascertained included suggestions for program

improvements and the advice the participants would give to prospective students who are considering an adult diploma option.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The interpretations of the findings of this study and the themes that emerged through the interview analysis were confirmed through comparison with the conceptual framework and the empirical research as I described in Chapter 2.

Bruner's (1960) theory integrated the role of learning, the readiness for learning, the structure for learning, and the motives that include interest, cultural influences, and the desire to understand in the learning process. The findings of my study aligned with Bruner's theory regarding the participants stating their underlying reasons for searching for an opportunity to further their education, and discovery of alternative pathways for the high school diploma, and what the successful completion would mean for their future. The participants shared that it was their readiness to seek out the opportunity to fill this educational gap that guided them to the diploma program.

Bandura's (1977) work with social cognitive theory involved a key role of individual behaviors in self-regulatory assessment that can influence the learning process. Bandura focused on behaviors that can lead to the motivational forces behind needs, wants, and desires of the individual and how it can relate to the development of continued education. These behaviors can act as functions that are integrated in the learning activity and serve as informative, motivational, and provide reinforcement, both positive and negative through the learning experience. The findings of this study were in alignment

with Bandura's work as evidence of the motivational forces that propelled them with persistence toward completion.

### **Interpretation of the Themes: Connection to the Program and Challenges**

The empirical literature review and the findings of the study confirmed the specific challenges of academic preparedness, self-esteem and confidence, and the personal economic factors faced by the adult learner population. These factors helped to serve as key elements to the participants' reasons for program connection and eventual completion of the high school diploma process. Flynn et al. (2011) and Rabourn et al. (2015) reviewed the challenges of the adult learner with the return of the high school diploma pursuit.

Flynn et al. (2011) conducted a qualitative study to explore challenges experienced with the adult learners return to an educational pathway and found the key challenges were family obligations, transportation, and financial reasons. Rabourn et al. (2015) also studied the adult learner population and found challenges with educational engagement where it involved both personal and external factors including time management, flexibility with coursework, and the program resources that help to support the diversity of the participants in terms of experience, backgrounds, and educational knowledge.

In this study, I found the themes of *connection to the program* and *challenges* as key elements in the experiences by the participants. Each participant reflected on the how and why they were seeking a diploma program and the situations that inspired the search for alternatives. These situations included loss of employment, a personal economic

downturn, and/or relationship insecurities. All nine participants reported this type of search when they found the program of choice for the high school diploma opportunity. Similar to the literature review findings, the participants noted that balancing work, family, and school requirements was critical, and learning how to actually study again was essential. Although this study involved successful completers, there were times that several considered dropping out or stopping out of the program. Ned, Kelly, and Rita all shared their intermittent thoughts of quitting, but used their motives that initiated the process for them as the key drivers for completion.

### **Interpretation of the Themes: Motivations and Strategies for Success**

The integration of adult learner success factors was essential in the literature review as to understand the key connections to the motivations of success and the support systems in the educational environment. Wyatt (2011), Ozaki (2016), and Rothes et al. (2017) explored the importance of the motivational focus and the need for supportive reinforcements in the area of success for the adult learner population.

Wyatt (2011) found that the motivation of the adult learner and the supportive engagement services are the cornerstone for success in the learning process. Wyatt also explored the self-concept of the individual and the strategies used in the reintegration to the educational path. The importance of the commitment of the educational provider was also reviewed for the need of positive reinforcement services as a means to move the adult learner to a completion status.

Ozaki (2016) explored the individual motivations and the educational factors that contribute to the successful experience of the adult learner. These contributions included

the social, physical, and academic elements that guided the return to learning pathways for the adult learner. Ozaki noted that it was the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that lead the adult learner for engagement and involvement for new educational opportunities.

Roths et al. (2017) explored the motivational elements of engagement, satisfaction, and the perception of achievement in the learning process. The development of the motivational profiles was essential in understanding the adult learner strategy and the program level strategy need for success. Roths et al. found that although the heavily embedded intrinsic motivational factors had the strongest push for success, there was much attachment to the supports and the influences of the extrinsic factors as well.

In this study, I confirmed these previous studies with the themes of *motivations* and the *strategies for success* presented as key factors for a completion element by the participants. These intrinsic and extrinsic influences helped to guide and support their determination to pursue a new educational opportunity. Ruth shared that she always wanted to return and achieve high school diploma status. Kelly noted that she knew finding the new alternative diploma program was her once in a lifetime chance to complete, and knew she had to enroll. Alice, Linda, and Rex noted it was a family member that was the extrinsic motivating factor to enter, persist, and complete the diploma program.

The strategies for success that were shared by the participants were either learned through life lessons or newly formed approaches for completion of the diploma program. Kelly shared it was the challenges in life that guided her to a completion status. Alice and Rex noted that employing a strong, positive attitude helped with their success. The sense



of empowerment, the process of self-awareness, and strategies that were employed for success was inherent through the participant's individual voice and the experiences through program engagement.

### **Interpretation of the Themes: Program Improvements and Advice to Prospective Students**

The interpretation of the themes of *program improvements* and the *advice to prospective students* was also aligned with the research and analysis with Book (2014) and Flynn et al. (2011). The review of the research provided a foundation of the importance of student feedback on the program experience, possible improvements, and words of advice to the potential students in the future through their own voice. Book (2014) described key lessons learned in the delivery of the alternative diploma path models through the discovery of assessing institutional readiness to initiate engagement, leadership support, and the development of data tracking systems that can promote effective success outcomes. All of which was aided with the help of student feedback regarding their experience with participation. Although the participants in this study stated positive experiences with program experience, there were comments on the need to enhance communication and marketing opportunities about the program to strengthen the messaging and reach of the adult population seeking alternative diploma options. Also, as noted by Ned, the creation of the program Facebook page helped to support cohort learning and a sense of belonging.

Flynn et al. (2011) included the experiences; the social perceptions; and personal, academic, and job-related drives that can be connected to the barriers to education. Flynn

et al. included that the past experiences in education can have a direct correlation to the fear of engagement in the learning activities. Thus, adult learners struggle to realize their potential as they try to understand the sense of the authentic self. The research by Flynn et al. was aligned with participants in this study and how they related the personal experiences from the past that once stood as a barrier on the mindset of returning to education. It was through this positive experience that the students were willing to offer the advice for any prospective student considering the diploma program. Linda and Rita shared advice of looking forward and think of the goals of the future, never give up, and stay focused to the end.

### **Limitations to the Study**

My purpose and design of this study was accomplished with credibility and trustworthiness measures intact. As noted in Chapter 1 as possible limitations to the study, the telephone interviews did not present any boundaries to gaining information about the participants' experiences, as they were fully able to share detail related to their encounters with the two programs. Also, there was no loss of memory of the motivations, challenges, and strategies employed with their successful completion.

There were, however, a few limitations that arose through the research process. One limitation was the self-selection process of the potential participants for securing the actual interview. The program coordinators from each of the institutions did perform sincere due diligence through repeated recruitment processes, but the variables of incomplete contact information caused challenges in reaching all parties in the identified pool of potential participants. Additionally, there were participants who self-selected and

provided consent for the interview process became unavailable for the scheduled timeframe and were unable to be reached for circumstances unknown.

### **Recommendations**

As a result of this study's interpretations and confirmation of the previous literature, my recommendations for further research involve a more in-depth study on the effects of continued education attainment for those who have stopped out prior to achieving their original learning objectives. Additionally, future studies could involve the exploration of the alternative diploma program characteristics of being online or competency-based and how they can best align with a potential adult student's skills, abilities, and goals for success. The nine participants in the study were eager to share their story of the reasons for the initial disruption in their educational path, their journey of positive reinforcement to seek new opportunities for engagement and completion, and the future outlook for success. The participants indicated new found hope and independence, positivity, and a sense of increased self-esteem. The confidence that they had realized after years of having to avoid discussions with others regarding high school completion has led them to a point of wanting to share the experience as a way to help others. This was in particular true for the female participants who noted that this pathway of independence was not always welcomed by surrounding support systems, but the realization of completion still brought them new pathways for success in different ways that brought about this sense of courage. Additionally, one program created the Facebook cohort page to continue the encouragement of the successful completers to support one another in their future aspirations. All the participants noted that the feeling

of completion was a triumph and as a result, it brought about hope, pride, and accomplishment that has been buried in the psyche for years.

### **Implications**

This study may have significant implications for program administrators working with potential students in the diploma completion programs and in the understanding of the student experience with the successful completion and the relationship to the adult learning theories. Additionally, this research may provide important data to assist in the development and integration of key support mechanisms for program effectiveness with the participating community colleges and other educational providers of these two diploma programs. Finally, this study may inform educational policy makers in the sustainability and continued development of the statewide educational approaches to reducing the number adults without high school diplomas.

### **Conclusion**

This study explored the perceptions of how successful students in either competency-based or credit recovery ADP describe their experiences about successful completion in the program. Using the conceptual framework based on the learning theory perspectives of Bruner (1960) and Bandura (1977) and in the review of the empirical literature in Chapter 2, I was able to confirm the key themes that emerged through the interview process and analysis for understanding the *connections to the program*, the *motivations* for the educational path by the adult learner, the *challenges* that were present, the *strategies for success* to persist, the participants thoughts on *program improvements*, and the keen *advice for potential students* for the alternative ADPs in the midwestern

state. The description and individual responses of the themes about these experiences were rich and thick with emotions. The results of this study may also explore the experiences of successful adult learners' in the attainment of a secondary education credential to support future program development and participation. This can lead to the training and post-secondary opportunities that will have a positive social impact to the overall education and economic health of today's society.

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

First, congratulations on your accomplishments! I truly appreciate your time and look forward to learning more about your experiences. My role for the research is as a PhD student and that this research is part of my work for the dissertation pathway. Of course, before we begin, do you have any questions that I can answer for you at this time?

### *Introduction of the study*

The purpose of this research includes my interest in a better understanding of the goals and outcomes of the participants, how this understanding relates to the adult learning theories, and how this information will help to inform future program development in servicing the undereducated adult population.

*Parameters of the interview:* Upon completion, I will send a transcript from the interview for review and confirmation.

Affirmation from the participant and ready to proceed.

### *Initial phase of the interview:*

Congratulations on your accomplishments of completing the program and successfully earning your high school diploma.

For demographic purposes, please share your gender and age.

1. How did you find out about the diploma program [name of program]?

Probe: What specifically attracted you to this program?

Probe: Did you consider any other options? If so, which ones?

2. Tell me what about the factors that led you to start the program to complete you high school diploma.

3. Once in the program, what factors motivated you?

Probe: What were your goals?

Probe: How would you describe the resources that supported you?

4. Describe what continued to fuel your interest in completing.

Probe: Specifically, what were the factors that helped to keep you moving forward to get to the finish line?

Probe: What did you like most about the program?

5. Were there other people who helped you in this completion process, if so, who?

Probe: What did they do or say that helped you in this completion process?

6. What, if any, challenges did you experience in the program?

Probe: What were these challenges and what did you do to overcome them?

Probe: What, if any, were the things that you liked least about the program?

7. Now that you have completed your high school diploma, what do you want to do next?

Probe: Explore further depending on answer – continued education, better employment opportunities, relocating for opportunities, etc.

8. If you were a leader in this program, what things would you continue to do?

9. What things would you do differently?

10. How would you describe your overall experience to the next adult learner interested in entering the program?

Probe: What would you have wanted to know before starting the program?

*Closing Remarks:*

11. Before ending our interview today, is there anything else you would like to add about your experience?

Thank you again for your participation. As stated in the beginning, I will send you a copy the transcript of your responses for your review and clarification. You can expect the transcript in about a week and I would ask that you return your approval of it to me within 5 days. I will also be sending you a \$20 Amazon gift card in appreciation of your participation.

Your experiences are important to creating successful programs for adult learners like you.

This concludes our interview process. Thank you!